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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER/GERMAIN  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRESIDENT'S ADVISOR ADVOCATES ELECTIONS  
FREE FROM OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Ambassador Naji Abi Assi, advisor to President Michel Sleiman, suggested that the new U.S. administration pursue regional peace in the Middle East, noting that Lebanon stood to benefit greatly from Arab rapprochement. Regarding Lebanon's spring 2009 parliamentary elections, Abi Assi stressed that Lebanon needed "political space," free from outside influence, and that the representation of both March 14 and March 8 in the government was a positive force. He stated that Sleiman would not formally form an independent bloc, but would encourage "moderate, open-minded" individuals, separate from the existing alliances, running for parliament. He downplayed the prospects of imminent peace talks (indirect or direct) between Lebanon and Israel, but said that Lebanon's negotiating with Israel on issues such as Palestinian refugees was viable in an Annapolis-like conference. Border issues, he said, were best resolved under the auspices of the UN. Abi Assi expressed optimism for the National Dialogue, noting that all of the participants seemed keen to continue the process. After Sleiman's trip to Cairo and New York, Abi Assi said Sleiman would "finally" make the trip to Iran (November 24-25), which Sleiman had put off despite persistent Iranian prodding. End summary.

ARAB RAPPROCHEMENT  
"BEST" U.S. STRATEGY

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met Ambassador Naji Abi Assi, Diplomatic and Political Advisor to President Michel Sleiman, at Baabda Palace on November 6. Abi Assi cited regional peace in the Middle East as the most important goal for the next administration in Washington, in his view. He explained that Lebanon benefits from regional peace, and loses when there is strife between regional players. Encouraging moderation in Lebanon was the best support the U.S. could offer Lebanon, said.

INFORMALLY FORMING  
AN INDEPENDENT BLOC

3. (C) Turning to internal matters, Abi Assi stressed that it is in Lebanon's best interest to have both March 14 and March 8 represented in the government. When Lebanon's neighbors

choose one party over another, he said, Lebanon suffers. He said he hoped the region and the U.S. would allow for "political space," in a way that is felt by the Lebanese.

14. (C) Addressing the Ambassador's inquiry about President Sleiman forming an independent bloc, Abi Assi said that Sleiman is "above blocs," adding that another bloc would not work. Instead, Abi Assi advocated a group of moderate individuals who are "separate" from the March 14 and March 8 alliances. In this way, he explained, no one is formally "with" the president, but they are informally in the sense that they are "moderate and open-minded," naming Robert Ghanem, Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, and Interior Minister Ziad Baroud as such individuals.

15. (C) He surmised that March 14, "for the most part," accepted this idea, while Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun holds that it was impossible to be "independent." He underlined that Sleiman would not campaign nor be involved with such a group, but would offer encouragement.

LEBANON-ISRAEL  
TALKS "UNLIKELY"  
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16. (C) Reviewing the possibilities that would allow for a Lebanese-Israeli dialogue, Abi Assi suggested that a breakthrough in the indirect Syrian-Israeli talks would bode well for a Lebanon track; however, he dismissed the likelihood of any breakthrough. Abi Assi ruminated that a second Annapolis conference was a possibility for talks with

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Israel on specific issues, as long as the talks were under the auspices of the UN or the U.S. He concluded that it was not realistic to expect any Lebanese dialogue with Israel at this time, but that regional events ultimately determined whether Lebanon would entertain the idea of talks with Israel. He added that peace between Syria and Israel would be to Lebanon's advantage.

17. (C) Abi Assi stated that President Sleiman does not oppose negotiations with Israel on issues such as the Palestinian refugees and water, but that the issue of boundaries (referring to Sheba'a Farms) was best negotiated within the UN framework. He noted that Syria and Israel have yet to react to the UN cartographer's assessment on Sheba'a. On the issue of refugees, Abi Assi said that the "right of return" was an international responsibility, and made the distinction between repatriation and compensation. He stated Lebanon's opposition to permanent resettlement of the refugees in Lebanon.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE:  
A WILL TO KEEP TALKING  
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18. (C) Relatively optimistic on the National Dialogue session held on November 5, Abi Assi assessed that there was a will by the 14 participants to keep talking. He added that everyone accepted the agreements reached during the National Dialogue in 2006 to address disarming Palestinians outside of the camps and Hizballah's arms. He noted that one of the two issues in contention was whether to enlarge the participation of the National Dialogue, saying that March 14 was adamant to keep the group as it is.

19. (C) According to Abi Assi, the national defense strategy was the second issue facing the group, and would take time to resolve. He explained that the March 14 and March 8 National Dialogue members were charged with drafting two separate papers on this topic, noting that March 14 members Walid Jumblatt and Amine Gemayel had each drafted a paper, while Aoun and presumably Hizballah had their own versions. Abi Assi said he sensed all of the members accepted that this process would take time.

SLEIMAN IN CAIRO,  
NEW YORK, AND IRAN  
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¶10. (C) Abi Assi said that Sleiman would visit Cairo before heading to New York for the UN Interfaith Dialogue November 12-13 in New York. Abi Assi confirmed that Sleiman would also travel to Iran on November 24, noting that it was somewhat obligatory, but that he had intentionally delayed the trip until he had visited the U.S. and its regional neighbors, despite Iranian prodding since May.  
SISON